

Archeological Excavations
at the
Mariah Wright House South Chimney
Appomattox Court House
National Historical Park



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Introduction

Archeological investigations at the south chimney of the Mariah Wright House at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park were conducted to collect information necessary for the repair/rehabilitation of the chimney and to provide information for compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act. Tests indicated that the chimney is constructed directly on the subsoil, and that reconstruction efforts in 1965 have removed virtually all archeological deposits associated with the occupation of the house and the events of 1865.

Background

The Mariah Wright House was constructed around 1823 (Schlegel and Carroll 1957). Measuring roughly forty by eighteen feet, the house is a one and one-half story frame structure with stone chimneys at each end. An attached kitchen wing was added around 1890. The National Park Service restored the house in 1965, removing the kitchen wing and excavating a basement and full foundation (Carroll 1965). Photographs indicated that all but a small triangular area adjacent to the south chimney had been impacted by construction. Other photographs suggest that even this area may also have been impacted, although less severely. In 1977, proposed development of the Wright farmstead resulted in archeological excavations designed to identify associated outbuildings (Fiero 1983). Five areas surrounding the house were tested, but no structural features were identified. Cultural materials were found to be limited to the first six inches of soil. In 1995, the park observed severe twisting and cracking of the south chimney. Architectural analysis by Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc. recommended excavation of backfill against the chimney and construction of an appropriate foundation to prevent its collapse (Welford 1995). Archeological excavations to gather information for design and compliance purposes were conducted in March, 1996.

Data Collection Procedures

All work was conducted by the author in March, 1996. All fieldwork and laboratory analysis was conducted in conformance with "Archeology and Historic Preservation: Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines." All soils were passed through one-quarter inch hardware cloth with recovered artifacts placed in plastic bags by provenience. All excavation units and features were documented by photographs and measured drawings both in plan and profile. All units were excavated to sterile soil with additional excavation conducted after final documentation to ensure that all soils containing archeological resources had been identified. Associated documentation and recovered artifacts were cataloged into the National Park Service's "Automated National Catalog System" and are curated at the park under Accession 513, catalog numbers APCO-4254 through APCO-4308.

Results of Investigations

Two units measuring 2.5 by 2.5 feet were excavated near the south chimney (Figure 1). Designed to examine any foundation structure for the chimney, Unit 1 was located in the center of chimney base. Unit 2 was designed to identify any resources associated with the house's occupation. Datum for all excavations is the northeast corner of Unit 1.

Unit 1

Unit 1 possessed five strata, reflecting the house's construction, occupation, and restoration (Figure 2).

Stratum 1, a layer of mottled grey-brown and reddish-brown clay loam represents the fill from the 1965 reconstruction. It contained cut nails and soda pop bottle glass (Table 1). Stratum I continues from the surface to 0.4 feet below datum. At the interface with Stratum 2, it contained numerous medium-sized sedimentary stones and small (0.2') lumps of cement lying flat on the surface of Stratum 2 (a harder, clay layer).

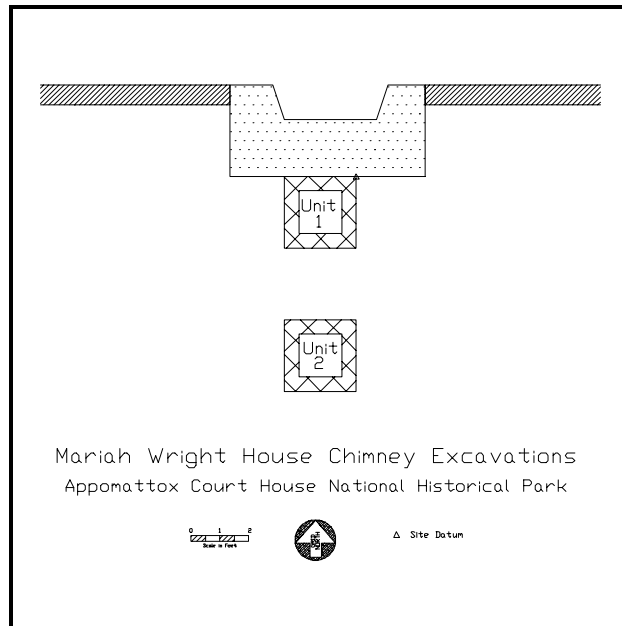


Figure 1: Location of Excavation Units.

Stratum 2 is defined by mottled grey-brown and reddish-brown sandy clay (similar to Stratum I, but denser). It contained wire nails, plaster fragments, and soda pop bottle glass dating the stratum to the twentieth century. Stratum 2 continues from 0.4 to 0.6 feet below datum.

Stratum 3 is composed of mottled grey-brown and reddish-brown sandy clay containing clay lumps and occasional large stones. It continues from 0.6 to 0.8 feet below datum. Containing few artifacts (one cut nail fragment and two fragments of clear flat glass) it represents the earliest construction and occupation of the house, although the artifacts most likely represent the late nineteenth-century occupation. The chimney base rests directly upon the upper margin of Stratum 3 (Figure 3).

Stratum 4 is composed of reddish-brown clay with small (0.05') rotting sandstone fragments and continues from 0.8 to 1.0 feet below datum. It contained no artifacts.

Stratum 5 is the sterile subsoil base. Composed of reddish-brown clay, it continues below 1.0 feet below datum.

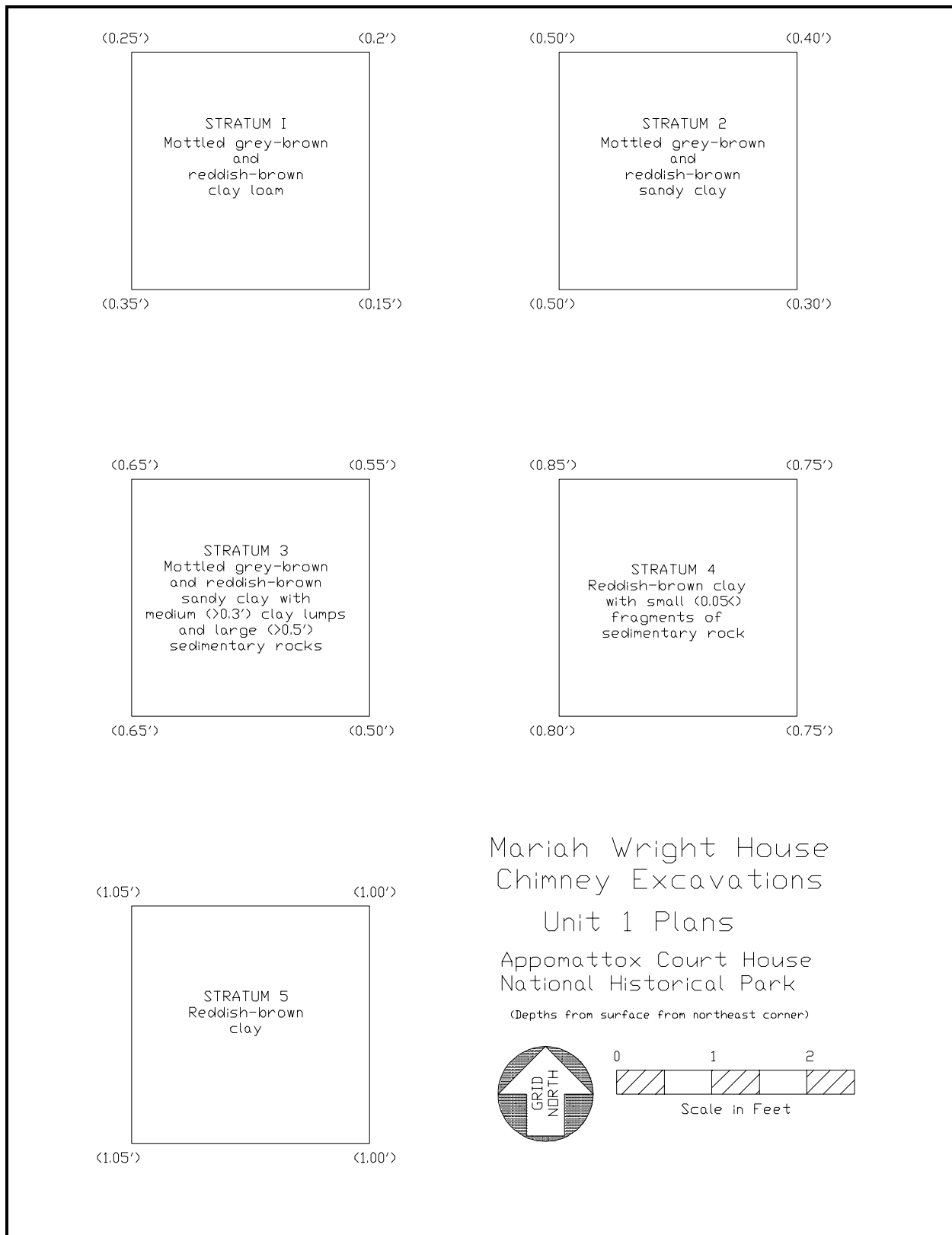
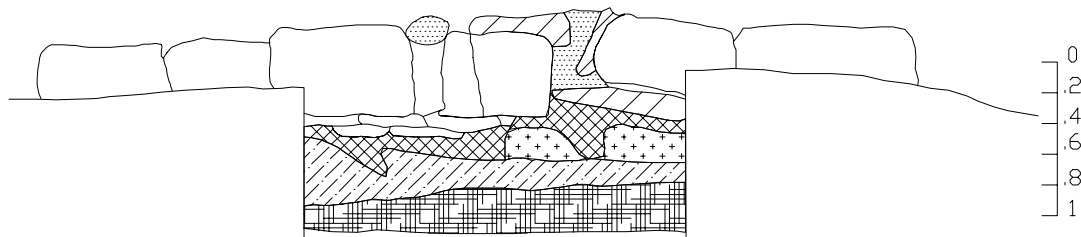


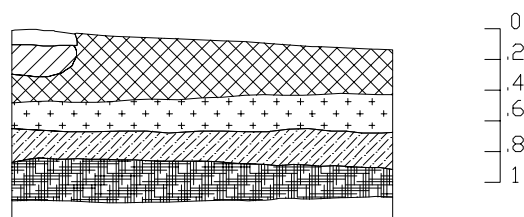
Figure 2: Unit 1 Plan Views.

Table 1: Artifacts Recovered

ARTIFACT	U1 ST2	U1 ST3	U1 ST4	U2 ST1	U2 ST2
Wire nail (comp) 105 mm	1				
Wire nail (comp) 78 mm					1
Wire nail (comp) 67 mm				2	
Wire nail (comp) 36 mm	1				
Cut nail (comp) 28 mm				1	
Cut nail (comp) 30 mm	1				
Cut nail proximal fragment				2	
Cut nail distal fragment		1			
Wire fragment (3.3mm dia.)					1
Plaster fragment	2				
Whiteware, plain				2	
Refined Earthenware, blue ext./white int.				2	
Vessel glass, clear	3			6	1
Vessel glass, aqua	2		1	9	4
Vessel glass, green	1				
Vessel glass, blue				1	
Vessel glass, amber				2	
Vessel glass, white					1
Flat glass, clear	2	2			
Flat glass, aqua				12	
Shell casing 11mm				1	

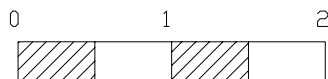


North Profile



East Profile

Mariah Wright House
Chimney Excavations
Unit 1 Profiles
Appomattox Court House
National Historical Park



Scale in Feet

Figure 3: Unit 1 Profiles.

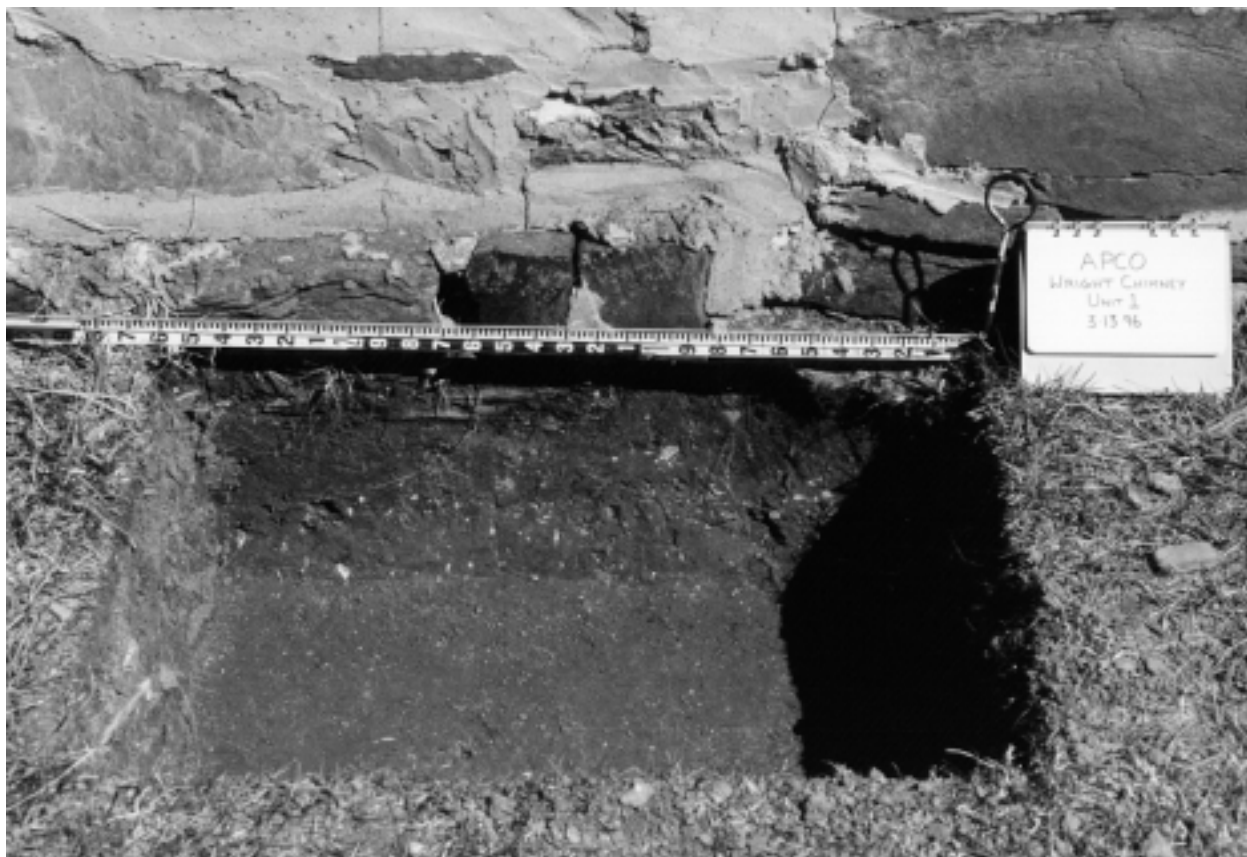


Figure 4: Unit 1 Profile.

Excavation of Unit 1 revealed that the chimney was constructed directly on the subsoil with no builder's trench (Figure 3). Most soil buildup around the chimney above Stratum 3 was the result of the 1965 restoration which may have truncated Stratum 3 or removed evidence of the later occupations.

Unit 2

Unit 2 is located 2.5 feet south of the south border of Unit 1, or five feet south of the chimney base (Figure 1). Possessing four strata, it also contained an extensive disturbance from installation of the foundation perimeter drain (Figure 5).

Stratum 1 is composed of grey-brown organic clay loam with occasional small fragments of rotting sedimentary rock. It lies from the surface (at 0.4 feet below datum) to 0.8 feet below datum. It contained a number of relatively modern artifacts and represents disturbance from the 1965 construction activities.

Stratum 2 is composed of mottled grey-brown and reddish-brown sandy clay with medium to large-sized sedimentary stones. It continues from 0.8 to 0.95 feet below datum. It too contains materials redeposited from the 1965 construction activities.

Stratum 3 appears at 0.95 feet below datum, containing a feature traversing the entire unit from the northwest to the southeast (Feature 1). The stratum is composed of reddish-brown sandy clay. Consultation with the facility manager indicated the feature was the drain line installed during the reconstruction in 1965. In the northeast half of the unit, Stratum 3 continues to 1.1 feet below datum. Stratum 3 was screened while the feature was not. Stratum 3 contained no artifacts and is equivalent to Stratum 4 in Unit 1.

Stratum IV (Stratum V in Unit 1) appears across the northeast half of the unit at 1.1 feet below datum and represents the sterile subsoil base composed of reddish-brown clay. The disturbance feature continues to an unknown depth.



Figure 5: Unit 2, Base of Stratum 2 showing Disturbance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Excavation of two units adjacent to the south chimney of the Mariah Wright House determined that the chimney base was constructed directly on the sandy clay soil without additional footings or subsurface structure. Moreover, the surrounding soil has been disturbed to the depth of at least 0.5 feet. As a result, no significant archeological resources associated with the occupation of the house or actions related to Civil War activities may be expected within the area that may be disturbed by actions to repair the chimney.

References Cited

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